

"Narratives of America'' : The Confrontation with the Unknown

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Narratives of America: **The Confrontation with the Unknown**

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Reading is a moment of discovery and reflection about various cultural contexts that can lead to a revaluation of concepts related with society. Travel accounts are among the records of this kind of impact with the new, the expectations, the unexpected.

Thus, when the traveller's eyes turn to the other, his critical view creates a relationship that can go from veneration to loathing. According to this, the relationship the traveller will develop with the unfamiliar can be one of comparison—what will enhance his involvement and fusion with the other culture—or one of judgment—which will result in the reaffirmation of his own cultural values.

Nagai Kafū was one of the travellers who narrated the covered path, capturing, by physical dislocation, moments and experiences lived by the Japanese immigrants who went to the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century.

The eyes of this Japanese writer guided us into the most different stories and allowed us to penetrate in a world that is sometimes real and sometimes fictional, of a reality unknown to the Japanese society at that time. The book *Amerika monogatari* (Narratives of America) is the result of the compilation of accounts and essays written during the four years Kafū lived in the United States.

Through narratives that tell the experience of Japanese immigrants Nagai Kafū offers us not only the opportunity of getting to know the reality of a people, but also the opportunity of reflecting about questions such the human behaviour facing madness, religion and social values.

Therefore, the dissertation "*Narratives of America: The Confrontation with the Unknown*" has the aim of making accessible to other readers this sensitive reproduction of United States' landscape, the American society and the feelings resulting of Kafū's own encounter with the West. In order to accomplish that, the work was divided in three parts. The first one is the exposition of biographical data and the works done by Nagai Kafū. The second part refers to reflections about themes in the narratives. And the last is the complete translation of the book *Narratives of America*.

The present article summarizes the dissertation in four items: 1. *Narratives of America*; 2) Main Themes; 3) *Narratives of America*'s Translation; 4) Final Considerations.

Narratives of America

During the four-year period in which Kafū lived in the United States (1903–1907), he wrote fourteen narratives, ten essays and about seven letters. In spite of having been written in America, fourteen of them were published in Japan. One month after Kafū returned to his country, in August 1908, twenty narratives were compiled and published in a book entitled *Narratives of America*. Due to the sensitive and perspicuous observations about an unknown country and an unknown people, in addition to the appreciation of western culture and literature, *Narratives of America* was seen as

a singular work able to describe the United States minutely.

The volume re-edited by Kafu years later includes one additional narrative, Nocturne Mist—and, after his death, the editor added one more story—A Night at the Port of Seattle, also written while the author was in the United States.

Therefore, in the current edition of the book we find twenty-three narratives:

- 1 キャビン夜話 – Nocturnal Conversation in a Cabin
- 2 野路のかえり – Path of Meadows
- 3 岡の上 – Above the Hill
- 4 酔美人 – Inebriating Beauty
- 5 長髪 – Long Hair
- 6 春と秋 – Spring and Fall
- 7 雪のやどり – Shelter from the Snow
- 8 林間 – In the Woods
- 9 悪友 – Bad Company
- 10 旧恨 – Old Sorrows
- 11 寝覚め – Awakening
- 12 夜の女 – Ladies of the Night
- 13 一月一日 – First of January
- 14 暁 – Dusk
- 15 シカゴの二日 – Two Nights in Chicago
- 16 夏の海 – Summer Sea
- 17 夜半の酒場 – Late Night Bar
- 18 落ち葉 – Fallen Leaves
- 19 支那街の記 – Tale of a Chinese Neighbourhood
- 20 夜歩き – Nocturnal Walk
- 21 六月の夜の夢 – June Night's Dream
- 22 シアトルの一夜 – A Night at the Port of Seattle
- 23 夜の霧 – Nocturnal Mist

The narratives in the book take place the area of Seattle and Tacoma and are mainly about Japanese immigrants in the United States. In Nocturnal Conversation in a Cabin, for example, which opens *Narratives of America*, Kafu presents two young Japanese men going to United States. One of them left Japan because he was tired of the prevalent social values, by which he wasn't worthy of marrying the woman he loved; the other was hopeful that, in the United States, he would have many chances to study, once he was discredited in his land of birth. With his narratives, Kafu registers the lives of Japanese immigrants—at that time about a hundred thousand people—who were enduring uncountable problems, such as racial discrimination, harsh adaptation and diseases. Most of them worked in the fields, others managed abandoned restaurants, directed amusement stalls in Coney Island or resorted to gambling.

The book's publication made a big impact on the Japanese literary scene because style and structure differed from the naturalist works of Emile Zola, which prevailed at the time. Besides

that, *Narratives of America* was the first book to bring observations and information about life and culture in United States. Until nowadays this work is mentioned as the only one that was able to describe in intimate and detailed manner that world—America—that was so much talked about back then.

One of the reasons the book was so welcomed by the Japanese public was exactly the change in style and writing techniques. Since all the western literary trends arrived in a short period of time, it comes as no surprise that literary movements like naturalism didn't have the same strength, impact and significant charge as it had happened in France. Thus, Japanese naturalism followed the autobiographic line, criticized by scholars for its monotony. Kafū imprinted a completely different tone in *Narratives of America*. However, he was criticized for putting aside depiction of real life, starting to write fictional narratives, whose orientation differed from the one professed by naturalism.

Main Themes

The book *Narratives of America* is the result of the compilation of several narratives written during the period in which the author lived in the United States. They are essays and accounts written according to the author's experience and to the stories he heard from other people. Therefore, each narrative's theme will also follow Kafū's path in the foreign land.

This enabled the reader to follow Kafū's full development as a writer and also showed the covered path, from New York to Kalamazoo. Thus, it's possible to highlight the stylistic changes in the way he worked and constructed the plot, characterized at the beginning by the strong naturalist influence, as we can notice in *Path of Meadows*, and later worked by the writer in a more free way, creating an universe of characters and plots disconnected from the idea of heredity and environment as delimitating factors.

In spite of the fact that the narratives were not published in chronological order, we can follow the path taken by the author, what he saw and observed in each place and, mainly, his efforts to raise money to go to France.

It is also evident that the narratives are not the result of a book with pre-established themes, but, following Kafū's inspiration, angst, conquests and visions facing the world in which he lived, they transport the readers through New York, Chicago, Illinois, the brothels and poor areas in big cities, among other places. Finally, it approximates the readers of an unknown world and makes them feel a sense of intimacy with trip, incorporating Kafū's experiences as their own.

We can say that the Japanese author was a traveller who observed and joined the daily life of the cities, drawing from this urban space the depiction of urban beauty. Moreover, using the term coined by Baudelaire, Kafū would be the *flâneur*, the lonely observer lost in the middle of the crowd, and "the intoxication to which the flâneur surrenders is the intoxication of the commodity around which surges the stream of customers"¹ (Benjamin, 1989, 129). In other words, in the non-identification between his self and the market, this individual gets closer, in an empathy movement, to the commodity.

In *Narratives of America*, Kafū deals with several themes as religion, women, relationship between men and women, the poor conditions and ambitions of the Japanese immigrants, the world

of pleasures and his views of the United States and the American people. Following, some of these main themes will be highlighted and each one of them will be discussed with the aim to show the cultural clash between American and Japanese cultures and the lives of Japanese immigrants.

Narratives of America's Translation

The translation presented in the dissertation was based on the last modified version of the book *Narratives of America*, published by Iwanami in April 14, 2006. Twenty-one narratives were published in the first compilation, in August of 1908, and "A Night at the Port of Seattle" and "Nocturnal Mist" were included after Nagai Kafū's death.

The author's style encloses extremely long phrases and several intercalated sentences, creating a certain discontinuity in the reading. In some cases, one paragraph can reach up to twenty lines. Kafū frequently uses breaks and dashes to separate the different ideas in the same phrase.

The new version of the book contains, in addition to changes made previously by the author, the reading of old ideograms, names of cities, countries and others.

We kept the translation the closest possible to the original, with slight modifications, especially regarding punctuation, given the long phrases. Words in English used by the author to emphasize the moment that would lose its force with the translation into Portuguese and Japanese terms referring to typical food or plays, unknown to those who aren't familiar with the Japanese, culture were quoted in footnotes. The notations between parentheses in the texts were made by the author himself.

The French poems translated into Japanese by Kafū were literally translated into Portuguese. In this case, Kafū's translations were used and any possible mistakes it might contain were not taken into account.

The difficulties to recreate the author's style into Portuguese were enormous. If translation is the art of rewriting a work without losing its content and stylistic identity, this translation resulted from the effort to present the public in a faithful way with the narratives written by Kafū, who not only described the lives of the Japanese immigrants, but ended up describing the several facets revealed by human beings while facing specific circumstances.

Final Considerations

Narratives of America was the outcome of the sharp look of Nagai Kafū, who, like flâneur observer of Charles Baudelaire's poetry, "wanders by the landscapes, intoxicated by the productive crowd" (Muricy, 1987, p 501) and finds beauty in the city lights and the bohemian life with the aim of showing the poetics of modern life in the metropolis. This look penetrated into the outskirts' world, where it found prostitution, race and class discrimination, poverty, dirt and nightlife. This observer went beyond and also exposed the contemplation of American culture through contrasts and situations opposed to the Japanese culture, as family organization and the relationship between men and women. As in *Les Fenêtres*, or *The Windows*, in which Baudelaire reflects upon the way these observations are made:

Celui qui regard Du dehors à travers une fenêtre ouverte, ne voit jamais autant de choses que celui qui regarde une fenêtre fermée. Il n'est pas d'objet plus profond, plus mystérieux, plus fécond, ténébreux, plus éblouissant qu'une fenêtre éclairée d'une chandelle.²

Looking from outside into an open window one never sees as much as when one looks through a closed window. There is nothing more profound, more mysterious, more pregnant, more insidious, more dazzling than a window lighted by a single candle³

In other words, in each narrative the narrator focused his look in just one theme, dissecting it to expose the subject in detail, gripping the reader's attention with essays and accounts about the behaviour of individuals facing troubles caused by social and economical changes in the end of the twentieth century. Georg Lukács asserts it is precisely the "richness and colour, the constant change and variety of human experience"⁴ (Lukács, 1965, p. 52) that attracts the reader's interest. Kafū isolated himself from the crowd to show the beauty behind what is considered common and ordinary and investigated these elements ignored by the common observer to show another point of view. So, this traveller crosses over the limits of values and prejudgements and goes beyond "as breaks in the evidence arise, opening ways in the landscape or avoiding drops and empty spaces" (Cardoso, 1995, p. 359).

Following the eyes of this traveller, one realizes they reveal the impact with the unknown upon encountering various landscapes along the path covered, where the movement and the discontinuous sceneries cause strangeness, prompting thoughts not only upon the landscape, but also upon the existence of societies different from his own.

Thus, *Narratives of America* lures the readers by its evocative tone, its prose style and the intimate way the narratives were composed. It is also the product of the cultural shock experienced by Nagai Kafū in the United States and the way this experience affected him as a writer and as a Japanese man. In spite of not aiming to criticize the Japanese or the American society, he highlighted with extreme sensibility the encounter with a civilization completely different from his own. He described with lucidity the impact of the West in Japan and in the lives of Japanese immigrants, showing his feelings, observations and appreciation of western culture and literature.

According to Japanese critic Sōma Gyofū, Kafū's style constituted a new form of literary expression of sensibility and sensations:

The United States were pictured by an angle completely different from the ones presented until now. Just that makes it a unique work. However, what touched me the most was the unprecedented way in which the author expressed sensibility and sensations. When I read *Narratives of America*, I felt a world with new emotions and sensations had appeared. I realized it was possible, even in the Japanese language, to write this kind of literature.⁵

Kafū examined the American society with the eyes of the "other," with a sharper perception, and was able to reproduce it vividly. The narratives do not criticize the quick modernization of Japan or the outskirts of American cities, but show a foreign look that "is able to see what the others

who are there can't perceive anymore" (Peixoto, 1995, p.363). The intense movement of the cities and of the social and economical changes generates a certain superficiality in the view, which tends to see only the external elements. We saw that Nagai Kafū did the opposite by focusing on certain points to show all aspects of American cities, with its brothels, its country scenery, its enormous buildings or multicoloured lights.

Therefore, the reflections in the present work were made with the aim of introducing this author still unknown in Brazil and to address the traveller's encounter with the most diverse situations during his journey, resulting in a work that introduces the United States to the Japanese. The book follows the author's literary development and, especially, presents a new way of seeing different kinds of beauty in the poor outskirts or in the countryside and a new way of thinking about human behaviour in face of adverse situations. Man builds, apprehends and interprets reality with the instruments given by culture, like a quasi compulsive weaver of himself, incessantly embroidering webs of significance to give the world meaning. And if we agree that such a web—in which there is a mix of loose and tight knots, and new and old knots, and threads of every colour—forms the culture, it is through this veil of culture, through those lenses, that *Narratives of America* also helps us to understand the values of that time, the American society and, still, makes us reflect about ourselves and the way we see the other.

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NOTES

- 1 Translator’s note: in BENJAMIN, Walter. *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*. Trans. Harry Zohn. NY: Verso, 1997.
- 2 BAUDELAIRE, Charles. *Modernismo: guia geral 1890–1930*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1989, p. 276.
- 3 Translator’s note: in *Paris Spleen*, trans. Louise Varèse (New York, 1947)
- 4 Translator’s note: translation to English by Prof. Arthur Kahn, in LUKÁCS, Georg, and KAHN, Arthur D., *Writer and Critic: And Other Essays* (iUniverse, 2005)
- 5 Adapted translation of a review by Sōma Gyofū, retirada do site: <http://uraaozora.jpn.org.nagai.html>. Original text: 而もそのアメリカと云ふ異国を今迄多勢の人が好加減なうはつ面だけの紹介をして居たのと、全く異つた方面から描いてある。それだけでも非常に珍らしかつた。併し僕が何よりも先づ嬉しく感じたのは、作者の情緒の新らしさと、感覚の新らしさとであつた。『あめりか物語』を読んだ時僕自身にも何だか情緒と感覚の新らしい世界が開けたやうな気がした。日本語でもこんな文学が出来るのかと云ふやうな気がした。